



The warrior ethos

Giving Airmen a warfighter's mindset

by Staff Sgt. Jeremy Larlee
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People have always glorified warriors. Their heroic deeds inspire and are the stuff of myths. Art, literature and music recount their deeds, and histories preserve them. This ensures people will continue to marvel at the accomplishments of past and present warriors.

Very few Airmen today have not heard of the exploits of Eddie Rickenbacker, Jimmy Doolittle, Billy Mitchell, Hap Arnold, Chuck Yeager, John Levitow or Bill Pitsenbarger.

These are Airmen's Airmen. Warriors.

There's one constant that binds great warriors like these — the strong code by which they lived and served. Warriors don't take lightly their lifestyle and beliefs.

To the Spartans of ancient Greece, being a warrior was everything. They centered their entire society and culture on the warrior creed. Sparta's children went to military boarding school at age 7. A person's status as a citizen depended on his military service. The Spartans' unflinching dedication made them one of the most feared and respected of the ancient peoples.

Not unlike the ancient Spartans, today's Airman lives by a warrior's creed — an ethos.

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. T. Michael Moseley said that ethos is the foundation of what it means to be an Airman.

"The warrior ethos has always been a part of an Airman's character," the general said. "But some people may have lost sight of it."

To regain the warrior ethos those Airmen must always exhibit "a hardiness of spirit and moral and physical courage," General Moseley said.

To guarantee Airmen know what it means to be warriors, they get a heady dose of warrior training from the minute they enter the Air Force. The process lasts throughout their careers.

That doesn't mean Airmen are not already warriors. They have always been at the forefront of their nation's wars since they took

A basic trainee provides defensive cover as fellow trainees crawl through one of the obstacles of the tactical assault course at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas. The half-mile course tests the trainees' defensive tactics and communications skills.

to the skies over Europe during World War I. During World War II, more 8th Air Force Airmen died on aerial missions over Europe than Marines in the entire conflict. Since then, Airmen continued the legacy from Korea to Vietnam and the war on terrorism. Along that path, they turned the Air Force into the world's prominent air and space power. It's a legacy Tech. Sgt. Daniel Wheeler doesn't lose sight of. He is one of the Airmen responsible for molding tomorrow's Airmen. A basic military training instructor at Lackland Air Force Base, Texas, his recruits are a bit older than the Spartan recruits of old. But the challenges Spartan instructors faced are much the same Airmen face today. Most important is developing recruits while introducing them to the warfighting ethos and the Air Force way of life, the sergeant said. "We're trying to change the mindset of our trainees," Sergeant

Wheeler said. "When they enlist, they have the impression that we're a 'chair force.' So we work to change that assumption and show them we're warriors like the (men and women in the) rest of the services." Recruits get a heavy dose of ethos at Lackland. They learn lessons at places like Lackland's tactical assault course. The half-mile course, littered with obstacles, physically and mentally challenges Airmen. Each trainee carries a weapon. And they learn to stick with their wingmen throughout the course. Those who fail to do so receive a loud reminder and extra direction from the cadre of instructors. Bad weather doesn't slow training. Sergeant Wheeler, who traveled the world with his retired Air Force master sergeant father before settling in San Antonio, said there is nothing better than seeing his Airmen in dirty uniforms and boots.

The course mimics the battlefield. And though there are no bullets flying overhead or exploding roadside bombs to contend with, trainees exhibit the same three reactions to the stress of battle common to warriors since ancient times: They freeze, flee or fight. A student of history, Sergeant Wheeler said the great armies of history trained rigorously. That way, their warriors knew how to react when facing the enemy. He said many Spartan theories, including the ones used in the 480 B.C. battle of Thermopylae — of Hollywood movie "300" fame — are melded into the instruction Air Force recruits receive. "To get the trainees not to freeze or flee is the goal," the sergeant said. "So the ethos we present, like the Spartans did, is to emphasize fighting. We have to get deep into their hearts and minds because that's where the ethos comes from." Sergeant Wheeler sees parallels between the Greek-Persian battle

at Thermopylae and the current war on terrorism. The Persians, like today's terrorists, counted on winning by instilling fear in their enemies. But faith in training and maintaining the warrior mindset, like the Greeks did, is the best way to counter fear, he said.

Airman Jeffrey Harrell is in training to become an Airman warfighter. The future personnel apprentice, from Belding, Mich., admits he underestimated Air Force basic training.

"It has been more difficult than I thought it was going to be," he said. "I didn't expect this level of intensity. It's important that I get this level of training because it may end up saving my life, or somebody else's life, in the future."

After tackling the tactical assault course, the Airman said it made him feel more in touch with the warriors who came before him. Finishing the course also gave him a sense of pride.

"I bragged to all of my friends back home that I was going to basic training," he said. "I



A basic trainee low crawls through a tactical assault course obstacle.

can't wait to go back home and tell everyone that I'm an Airman." It's that sense of pride Sergeant Wheeler wants all his Airmen to have when they leave training. It's why he takes the training of the recruits so seriously. He knows today's fewer Airmen will have more responsibilities than any other generation before them.

"But it doesn't matter how big your force is," the sergeant said. "Through solid training, you can overcome any obstacle. The war we're fighting is real and these recruits are going to be a big part of it."

That's why from the moment they don the Air Force uniform, Airmen must consider themselves members of an elite, warfighting cadre, General Moseley said. Today's Airmen are disciplined, agile, combat-focused and expeditionary.

Airmen are accomplishing their varied missions, mostly in Iraq and Afghanistan. They take their role as warfighters to heart — just like the warriors who came before them.

"Every single Airman, every person who walks across the parade deck at Lackland and every person who is commissioned is a combatant. That is our culture," General Moseley said.

As members of a fighting Air Force, Airmen know their mission is to fly, fight and win no matter where their missions take them.

"We should embrace the notion the Air Force is a combatant organization," the general said.

On the plains of Thermopylae, 300 Spartans — through their belief in a warrior ethos — managed to fend off a giant Persian attack on their way of life for three days.

Today, Airmen are fending off an attack not much different than the Spartans faced. Whether dropping bombs on targets, pulling convoy duty, finding targets on the front lines, Airmen are knee-deep in the war on terrorism.

It is a task Airmen don't take lightly. And that is what the new warrior ethos exemplifies. 🦅



Instructor Tech. Sgt. Christina Fitzpatrick puts her hands up after basic trainees captured her during a defensive tactics training exercise. The sergeant was playing the role of an intruder.